

A
S E R M O N

Preached at the

C O N S E C R A T I O N

O F T H E

Right Reverend Fathers in God,

RICHARD Lord Bishop of CARLISLE,

A N D

JOHN Lord Bishop of PETERBOROUGH,

I N

L A M B E T H C H A P E L.

On SUNDAY *October 4.* 1747.

By *JOHN WILLS*, M.A. *K*

Vicar of *Thorpe* in *Surry*, and Chaplain to the Lord Bishop of
PETERBOROUGH.

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L O N D O N:

Printed by *J. Oliver*; and Sold by *W. MEADOWS*, at the *Angel* in
Cornbill; and *B. DOD*, at the *Bible* and *Key* in *Ave. Mary Lane*,
near *Stationers Hall*.

M D C C X L V I I .



 ACTS xvii. 11, 12.

These were more Noble than those in Thessalonica; in that they received the Word with all Readiness of Mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those Things were so.

Therefore many of them believed.

THIS Encomium upon the *Bereans*, will at all Times furnish us with Variety of useful Instruction, and on the present solemn Occasion, suggest such Reflections as, I hope, will not be thought unseasonable.

AT the Beginning of this Chapter we read, that St Paul, during his Stay at *Thessalonica*, where was a Synagogue of the Jews, zealously exerted himself in making Converts to Christianity. As his Manner was, he went in unto them, and three Sabbath Days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures, opening and alledging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and rose again from the Dead; and that this Jesus, whom he preached unto them,

them, was Christ. Upon this, we find that *some of them believed, and consoled with Paul and Silas;* Others, *which believed not, being moved with Envy,* raised a Tumult in the City, committing such Outrages, and Acts of Violence, that the Disciples were forced to provide for the Safety of the Apostle and his Companion, by immediately sending them away by Night unto *Berea,* another City of *Macedonia.* There likewise the *Jews* had a Synagogue, and the Word of God was preached by *Paul* unto them, concerning whom it is said in my Text, *These were more Noble than those in Thessalonica; in that they received the Word with all Readiness of Mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those Things were so. — More Noble;* that is, of a better Disposition; more candid, fair, and ingenuous than the others; open to Conviction, and yet not so entirely and implicitly relying upon the Authority of the Apostle, as to omit searching and examining, whether the Prophecies of the Old Testament, relating to the Messiah, were faithfully quoted, and conclusively applied by him, or not. After an impartial Hearing of his Doctrine, and a daily, that is, diligent Scrutiny into it, by closely comparing it with their own Scriptures, they gave such a full Assent to it, as Reason and Revelation required from them, and *many of them believed.*

THE Evidence upon which the *Jews* founded their Belief, was chiefly deduced from the Writings of their own Prophets, to which *St Paul* constantly referred them, in order to their being satisfied, that all the antient and well known Predictions concerning the Messiah,

were

were literally compleated, and precisely fulfilled in the Person of the blessed *Jesus*.

THE Phrase, *receiving the Word*, must be understood in a Sense somewhat different from this, when applied to the *Greeks*, or *Gentiles*; for we read that *many of them also believed*, upon the Apostle's publishing the Gospel Terms of Salvation. The *Jewish Scriptures* here, could be of no Weight or Authority; and therefore, the Argument drawn from the Completion of Prophecies, could not carry any such Conviction with it, as it did in the former Case. However, though no distinct mention be made in the Text of the several Topicks which St *Paul* insisted upon, and which the Spirit of GOD suggested to him, whereby he might persuade each Sort of Hearers to embrace Christianity; yet we find at the Close of this Chapter, that his *Speech*, with great Propriety adapted to the *Gentile* as well as to the *Jew*, was in *Demonstration of the Spirit, and of Power*; that he appealed to the signal Proof given of the divine Mission of our Saviour, and his Apostles, by the Miracles which they wrought, and above all, that he *opened and alledged* the Excellency and Purity of that Religion which they made known to the World, the Reasonableness and Wisdom of the Doctrine itself.

THE inspired Writer particularly mentions two Reasons of the Preference given to the Disciples at *Berea*; namely, in that *they received the Word with all Readiness of Mind*; and in that *they searched the Scriptures daily, whether those Things were so*, as they were delivered

them, was Christ. Upon this, we find that *some of them believed, and consoled with Paul and Silas; Others, which believed not, being moved with Envy, raised a Tumult in the City, committing such Outrages, and Acts of Violence, that the Disciples were forced to provide for the Safety of the Apostle and his Companion, by immediately sending them away by Night unto Berea, another City of Macedonia.* There likewise the *Jews* had a Synagogue, and the Word of GOD was preached by *Paul* unto them, concerning whom it is said in my Text, *These were more Noble than those in Thessalonica; in that they received the Word with all Readiness of Mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those Things were so. — More Noble; that is, of a better Disposition; more candid, fair, and ingenuous than the others; open to Conviction, and yet not so entirely and implicitly relying upon the Authority of the Apostle, as to omit searching and examining, whether the Prophecies of the Old Testament, relating to the Messiah, were faithfully quoted, and conclusively applied by him, or not.* After an impartial Hearing of his Doctrine, and a daily, that is, diligent Scrutiny into it, by closely comparing it with their own Scriptures, they gave such a full Assent to it, as Reason and Revelation required from them, and *many of them believed.*

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delivered by the Apostle. This is the distinguished and amiable Character, whereby they are recorded in sacred History.

As such a Behaviour in the *Hearers* of the Gospel, will at all Times contribute to the Enlargement of CHRIST'S Kingdom, their Example must be allowed highly to deserve our Imitation. — In the following Discourse therefore, I shall

I. FIRST endeavour to represent the Excellency of their Disposition, who *receive the Word with all Readiness of Mind.*

II. SECONDLY, To shew, that it is the Duty of all Christians, according to their several Capacities, to be diligent and careful in *searching the Holy Scriptures*, wherein this Word is contained.

III. THIRDLY, From what shall have been delivered, I shall deduce some suitable Observations, both with Regard to the Dispensers, and Receivers of the Word of GOD.

I. THAT *Word which GOD sent unto the Children of Israel, preaching Peace by Jesus Christ*, has from Age to Age been faithfully transmitted to us in the Books of the New Testament; wherein are comprised all Things that are necessary to be *believed and practised* by Christians. Although therefore, the Scriptures referred to in the Text, are those of the Old Testament only; yet, by Parity of Reason, the Writings

ings of the New, are to us the Rule of Faith, or a Summary of those divine Truths, which are peculiar to the Christian Religion. The general End indeed of the Old and New Testament is * one; they are the *Dispensations of one and the same God*, and both center in the *Messiah*; the Difference between them, consisting chiefly in this, that the Books of the Old Testament taught Salvation through CHRIST that *should* come, those of the New, through CHRIST that *was* come.

BUT what little Impression would all the persuasive Arguments, all the powerful Exhortations, even of St Paul have made upon his Hearers, without a *Readiness of Mind*, a Willingness to receive Instruction, on their Parts? And what small Effect will the various Motives to *Righteousness* and *true Holiness*, set forth in the Gospel, now have on the Practice of Christians, unless they receive the *Word* with Simplicity and Integrity of Heart, with an unfeigned Desire to *know*, in order to perform the Will of GOD, contained in it? This is the chief Qualification necessary to a *profitable Hearing of GOD's Word*, the only one taken notice of in the Text; and indeed, most others are easily reducible to it; at least, without it, all others are unavailing. It pre-supposes a Freedom from Partiality and Prejudice, which disturb the Mind, and pervert the Judgment. It includes in it, that sincere Love of Truth, which leads to the habitual Practice of every moral Virtue,

* HOOKER'S *Eccles. Polity*, Book I. Sect. 14.
Pastoral Letter, p. 61.

Bp. of London's *Third*

and is the very Foundation upon which Religion is built. This teachable, and honest Disposition, is by our blessed Saviour, in his Parable of the Sower, compared to the *Good Ground*. The one shews its Fertility, upon proper Cultivation; and the other, upon due Instruction will not fail to discover and exert itself. In short, this Temper of Mind, prompts Men to attend impartially to Reason and Revelation, which are the only Means whereby the Will of GOD can be made known to them.

REASON is the *Word* of GOD, written in the Heart of Man. Those who listen to it, are enabled to form to themselves worthy Notions, concerning the divine Nature and Perfections; and to discern the essential and unchangeable Difference between Good and Evil. None can neglect *this Gift that is in them*, without great Uneasiness and Remorse: The sincere Inquirers after Truth, are indefatigable in improving it.

NOR are they less attentive to the Voice of Revelation — Having maturely considered and weigh'd the evident Proofs, that the Christian Religion is truly of divine Institution, they sincerely and stedfastly believe its Doctrines; being thoroughly convinced, that the Duties which it enjoins, are most reasonable in themselves, and necessary to their future, as well as present, Happiness, they fail not conscientiously to practise them. They make that sacred Book, which is the Repository of these Doctrines and Duties, their Counsellor and their Guide; they thankfully accept and embrace

brace the Terms of Salvation, therein declared and made known, and are earnest in the Pursuit of the most important and valuable Knowledge, even the *Knowledge of the only true God, and our Saviour JESUS CHRIST*, or the revealed Will of God, in the Gospel.

II. THIS brings me, in the Second Place, to shew, That it is the Duty of all Christians, according to their several Capacities, to be diligent and careful in *searching the Holy Scriptures*; imitating the Example of the *Bereans*, whose Praise is in the Gospel, first, in that they heard *the Word with all Readiness of Mind*; secondly, in that they *searched the Scriptures daily, whether those Things were so*.

THAT this is a Duty incumbent on all Christians, may be inferred

1. FIRST, From the Exhortations of our blessed Saviour Himself to his Hearers, that they should search the Scriptures, as a Means, whereby they might discover the Truth of his Doctrine. His frequent Appeals to their Knowledge of the Scriptures of the Old Covenant may, by Analogy of Reason, be applied by us to those of the New.

2. BUT Secondly — That which is a Rule to all, ought to be known by those to whom it is made a Rule; else it is a Rule in vain. That which concerns *all*, should be the Subject of *every one's* Enquiry. It is true, some have not natural Capacity and Ability;

and where Ignorance is really invincible, it claims Excuse and Pity. Others have but few Talents committed to them, and *where much has not been given, much will not be required* by an all-gracious G O D. In general, the intellectual Faculties of Men, are exerted and improved in very different Degrees, and with a very great Disparity amongst them.

NEITHER are *Moral Qualifications* equal in all. Many do not *Receive the Word* with that *Readiness of Mind*, with which it *ought to be received*. Some are immersed in Vice and Sensuality: Others are strangely perverse and obstinate; the former *cannot*, the latter *will not* open their Eyes to religious Truths. They who are hurried and transported by violent Passions and Prejudices, are as unlikely to hearken to the Precepts of the Gospel, as those Persons are to find their Way, who wilfully shut their Eyes against the Light which they should walk by. They *bate to be reformed*, and therefore *cast the Word of Truth behind them*. These are Obstructions which hinder Men from *reading* and understanding holy Writ, and which, by the Way, prove the Usefulness of appointing a peculiar Order of Persons to teach the Ignorant, to excite the Unattentive, and to reprove the Vicious; but the best Method of removing these very Impediments, is to be learnt from the Scriptures themselves, which are *profitable for Doctrine, for Reproof, for Correction, and for Instruction in Righteousness*; and therefore it is the Duty of Christians in general to be diligent and careful, according to their several Capacities, in *searching those sacred Writings*,

ings, wherein they will find an unerring Rule of their *Faith* and *Practice*.

AGAIN — All Men are equally, and most nearly interested, in whatever conduces to their own Happiness. Now those Doctrines which are necessary to the Happiness of all, even their eternal Happiness and Salvation, being revealed in the Scriptures, it is evident that it behoves all diligently to enquire into the latter, that they may not be ignorant of the former. Those who would be directed in the Way that leads to everlasting Life, will gladly follow the divine Guidance; those who are desirous of being instructed in G O D's Will, and their own Duty, will heedfully apply themselves to the Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, wherein both of them are declared and explained.

ANOTHER Argument to this Purpose, arises from the Clearness and Perspicuity with which all the Doctrines necessary to Salvation are delivered. These may be understood without Depth of Learning, or Comprehensiveness of Genius; as they are necessary to be *believed* by all, they are adapted to the *Capacities* of all. They are of the utmost Weight and Importance, and yet the Access to the Knowledge of them is easy.

BUT it may be objected — Is there not mention made, even in the Writings of the New Testament, of *some Things hard to be understood*? and are not the *Unlearned and Unstable* said to *wrest the Scriptures to their own Destruction*? — To which we reply, that if the whole

whole Passage where these Words occur, be laid together and considered, it will appear, that St *Peter* meant it as a Caution, not to deter Men from reading the Epistles of St *Paul*, but to read them with greater Diligence, Care and Attention. A Prohibition from reading them cannot be meant by it, because such an Interpretation would flatly contradict several Places which expressly require and command the *Searching* into them; and it is observable, that the Epistles of St *Paul*, as well as of the rest of the Apostles, are directed to all Believers. They may have been the accidental Cause of Schisms and Heresies, and *wrested* to countenance Errors; but it cannot be inferred from thence, that they ought not to be read at all, only that they should be read with Deliberation, Humility, and Impartiality.

THE last Argument which I shall mention, whereby this Duty of *Searching the Scriptures* may be enforced, shall be drawn from the frequent Admonitions which are therein to this very Purpose. *Whatsoever Things were written aforetime, were written for our Learning. They are able to make us wise unto Salvation.* The God of Mercy would have *all Men to be saved, and to come to the Knowledge of the Truth.* St *James* calls upon his Profelytes to *receive with Meekness the ingrafted Word, which was able to save their Souls*; and St *Paul* charges his Disciples, and in them all succeeding Christians, that the *Word of GOD should dwell richly in them*; that *they should grow, as in Grace, so likewise in the Knowledge of our Lord and Saviour JESUS CHRIST.*

FROM

FROM what has been hitherto offered it appears, that, as the Principles of the Christian Faith are to be found entire and uncorrupted in the Writings of the Evangelists and Apostles, without any Additions of human Invention, the best Means of composing all Differences among those, who sincerely desire to understand and practise the Truth, is to have Recourse to the sacred Oracles themselves; or in other Words, that the Scriptures are the only infallible Rule * whereby to judge of Controversies amongst Christians.

WHEN new or uncommon Doctrines are propounded, they should be brought to the Test of that sure Criterion, the *Word of God*. If in such Doctrines there be any Points repugnant to what is contained in those holy Writings, we may safely conclude them not *of God*; for *God* cannot contradict Himself.

IT appears likewise, that the Method used by the Church of *Rome* to keep the common People in Ignorance of the true Meaning of Scripture, is to the last Degree unjustifiable, and such an Insult on the Understandings of Men, as cannot sufficiently be abhorred and detested. — It is every Man's Duty, according to his Ability, to acquaint himself with the Grounds of the Religion he professes; in order to which, he should receive Instruction with *all Readiness of Mind*, and be careful and diligent in *searching the Scriptures, whether*

* CHILLINGWORTH'S Religion of *Protestants* a safe Way to Salvation, Chap. 2.

the Things in which he has been instructed, are conso-
nant to them, or not.

· III. IT remains, Thirdly, That I should deduce from what has been delivered, some suitable Observations both with Regard to the Dispensers and Receivers of the Word of GOD.

BUT before I proceed to these Observations, it is incumbent on me to premise, that nothing by Way of Direction or Advice to the venerable Audience, before whom I stand, is intended by them. It behoves me rather, with all Humility and Readiness of Mind, to apply myself to You, RIGHT REVEREND FATHERS, as a *Receiver of the Word* from You, and not as a *Dispenser* of it, or of any of its Admonitions and Instructions to You. It becomes *me* rather (if aught of this Kind becomes me) to beg Leave to refer You to those *Scriptures*, which have been the Subject of my Discourse; to *that Church*, over which our LORD has made you immediate Overseers, and to the *Words of that Office*, which is relative and peculiar to this awful and sacred Solemnity.

WITH respect to subordinate, with respect to inferior Dispensers, an Observation or two upon what has been said, may not be altogether so unsuitable, and without its Use.

I. IF then it be every Man's Duty to *search the Scriptures*; if it be an high Commendation of those that do;
much

much more must it be esteemed the Duty of the *Dispensers* of them to the People to make them their daily Employment and Study. Less, much less surely is required to qualify Men to be fit *Receivers* of the Word, than is required to qualify them to be publick *Teachers* of it.

THOUGH an intimate Acquaintance with, and an accurate Skill in the Languages, in which this Word was wrote, is not in the general to be expected from Hearers or Readers of it in their own Tongue, yet are they highly expedient to a *right dividing*, and to a just and consistent Interpretation of the several Parts of it, some of them confessedly obscure, or seemingly, clashing and interfering with one another.

WHAT Pains are still required to unravel and to account for Scripture-Difficulties, may be inferred from the many Years Pains that have already been taken by pious and learned Men to this Purpose; and yet, after all, there is Room enough left for further Disquisitions and Discoveries, the Effect of the like intense Application, and of the like assiduous and laborious Search.

AGAIN, Secondly — We have within the Compass of this Chapter an Account of St *Paul's* preaching three several Times, at three different Places; at *Thessalonica*, at *Berea*, and at *Athens*; and at each Time and Place preaching upon the same Subject, comprized in the last of his Discourses, under two Words — *Jesus*, and the *Resurrection*. Preachers of the Gospel may learn from

hence, what are their true and proper Subjects, even the great and important *Doctrines* as well as *Duties* of it. The Term [WORD] made use of in the Text as a Term for the whole Gospel, further suggests this to them as their special and appointed Province.

THESE indeed were Subjects, as employed for the Conversion of *Jews* to Christianity, that were immediately necessary to that End; and are they not Subjects at this Day, and in these Times become highly seasonable and requisite to be fully and frequently inculcated, as a Means to prevent the Increase of Opinions inconsistent with Scripture, in a Church and Nation that were once distinguished for their Soundness and Sincerity in the Christian Faith?

WITH Regard to *Receivers* of the Word, for their Instruction and Use it may be observed,

FIRST, That the Faith of these Converts was strictly *rational*; founded upon Evidence fit to produce Conviction. They received the Word with *Readiness*; they *searched the Scriptures whether those Things were so*; and *therefore* they believed.

THE same must be the Foundation of an Assent to the Truth of the Gospel in every *Receiver* of it. It is not to be received and embraced upon the bare Word of the Dispensers of it, no more than the *Berean* Converts

verts received or believed what St *Paul* preached, barely upon his Authority.

THE same Disposition of Mind, and the same diligent Search, have in all Ages generally produced the same Effect. Whereas, if Men *search* not with a *Readiness to receive*, but with Inclinations and Wills, perverted by their Passions and Lusts, to disown and reject the Gospel; no Wonder it meets with Cavils and Exceptions to it. Let them but follow our LORD's Rule — Sincerely and honestly endeavour to DO the divine Will, and of Course, the Doctrines pretending to a divine Revelation will find an easy Reception from them; then they may with all Freedom, consistent with Ingenuoufness and Candor, examine the Grounds on which such Pretensions are built.

I OBSERVE, Secondly, The great Advantage it was to Christianity, to the Growth and Increase of it, to meet with such Converts to it, and consequently, such Advocates for it, as these Men were. Men of *perswadable* Minds, and who searched with Diligence in order to be satisfied. One *Believer* thus made adds more Weight and Strength to the Christian Cause, than great Numbers of those, who receiving it only upon Tradition and Trust, and with an implicit Faith, are at the same Time unable to give a *Reason of the Hope that is in them*.

IT may be observed, Thirdly, How much the Reception of the Gospel depends upon the Disposition of

Mens Minds. That very Doctrine which met with such Opposition from the People of *Thessalonica*, met, we find, with a ready Reception from the People of *Berea*. The Doctrine was one and the same, and the Preacher of it was the same; so that there lay no Obstacle in the Way to the Reception of it, but what arose from the Indisposition of the Receivers.

HEARERS of the Word preached ought to weigh this Observation well, before they proceed to charge their Want of spiritual Improvement from the Ministration of it, to any Want of proper Qualifications in the Dispensers of it.

UPON the Whole — Both Receivers and Dispensers of the Word have all imaginable Reason to conclude, that the Faith of these *Converts*, as it was strictly *rational*, so it was truly *practical*; attended with Resolutions, supported by the divine Grace, to obey that Word, which with such *Readiness* they had received, and which upon such Conviction they had embraced.

IT is not to be thought, that a Faith which was the Effect of such Dispositions of Mind, and of such diligent Searches after the Truth, could be unattended with the natural and genuine Fruits of it — an holy and unblameable Life: Unattended with these Fruits, it had been in Them, what it must be in Us — Us the Preachers, and You the Hearers of the Word — Unprofitable and Vain.

THAT

THAT the proper Influence of *our* Preaching, upon
Ourselves and upon You, may appear in and from our
Conversation and Practice,

' GRANT, we beseech Thee, Almighty GOD, that
' the Words which we have heard this Day with our
' outward Ears, may, through thy Grace, be so grafted
' inwardly in our Hearts, that they may bring forth in
' us the Fruit of good Living, to the Honour and Praise
' of thy Name, through JESUS CHRIST our Lord.
' Amen.

F I N I S.

THAT the proper influence of our Reading upon
Ourselves and upon You, may appear in and from our
Conversation and Practice.

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F I W I E

